

NATO'S EUROPEAN MEMBERS

Partners or Dependents?

Richard L. Russell

The transatlantic relationship is fraying at the edges. The Europeans are increasingly uneasy over the George W. Bush administration's national security policy, judging by the pronouncements coming from government officials. While the tragedies of 11 September 2001 garnered Americans broad sympathy in Europe, emotional support since has steadily eroded. What had been European sympathy on a personal level to American pain and suffering is gradually giving way to anxiety about this nation's preponderance of global power, mixed with an awareness—if in many instances only subconsciously—of Europe's own shortcomings, particularly in the realm of international security.

Certainly, European capitals are lending a hand in the diplomatic, intelligence, and police work needed to track and round up al-Qa'ida operatives who use Europe as a hub for international operations. Nevertheless, Europeans are weary of an American "war on terrorism" that has become an open-ended campaign that may drift into areas where European and American interests diverge.

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They are uneasy that Washington may have cast too wide a net in labeling North Korea, Iraq, and Iran as constituting an "axis of evil." The Europeans fear that the American ego has been unduly inflated by the impressive military campaign that ousted the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and disrupted the al-Qa'ida network, and that the victory (of sorts) in Afghanistan will fuel American ambitions to take on their erstwhile enemy Saddam Hussein. While Washington is inclined to see the advantages of Saddam's removal from power, the Europeans dwell on potential dangers

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of unintended consequences, particularly the negative impact of an American military campaign on Arab political opinion toward the West. Even the most stalwart of American allies in Nato, the United Kingdom under Prime Minister Tony Blair, is facing an uphill battle in persuading its public of the wisdom of taking on Saddam.

The debate about war with Iraq is touching a raw European nerve that is exposed by bouts of conflict but subsides in times of peace. European prestige—or reputation for power—has taken a beating in the post-Cold War period, which has been characterized more by conflict than by peace. Europeans over the past twelve years have been reminded repeatedly of the decay of their military capabilities—in the Persian Gulf War, the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo, and most recently in Afghanistan. They have talked loudly about the need to redress military shortcomings, but their actions have not been commensurate with their words. Even if European political sentiment were to be turned around by the Bush administration's diplomatic efforts to persuade Nato capitals to support a war against Saddam, the Europeans would be able to make little real military contribution to the campaign. A war with Iraq would be yet another entry on the growing list of international security challenges in which the Europeans were not up to the task.

Much ink has been spilt in the political debate over Nato enlargement, but less on combat power—the litmus test for a military organization, which Nato still purports to be. On the whole, the military capabilities of Nato members—with the exception of the United States—are seriously declining. Nato's dwindling military capabilities, moreover, have now been dissipated by numerous new arrivals to alliance ranks—the Baltic States, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Candidates for Nato membership share important characteristics—they bring potentially large security burdens but few military resources. Nato's security balance sheet is already in the red with respect to its core members, and it is poised to deteriorate further with new arrivals. An outside observer more interested in seeing Nato buttress its military capabilities than in its political pomp and circumstance is compelled, like the child watching the parade, to cry out, "The king has no clothes!"

ATROPHYING MILITARY POWER

Nato militaries in the 1990s had taken halting steps in downsizing, professionalizing, and making their forces more mobile and readily deployable for operations outside of Europe. These steps are designed to convert large standing armies—filled with conscripts and designed to fight a war with the Warsaw Pact in Central Europe—to forces suitable for new and, more often than not, unanticipated security challenges outside Nato's traditional area of interest.

The British and French militaries have made the longest strides and of the Nato forces are now the most capable of deploying abroad.

The other major European power, Germany, is lagging far behind. Berlin still clings to the old notion of a large military with conscript troops for territorial

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defense; it looks to smaller forces of volunteer soldiers to fill operational assignments abroad, such as in the Balkans. As Mary Elise Sarotte points out, "The majority of policy-makers, practitioners

and even academic theorists in Germany consider conscription not only well suited but also essential to facing today's security challenges."¹ The Germans have been slow to grasp the reality that ten-month conscripts simply cannot be trained sufficiently to perform the tasks of modern militaries and that sustaining them siphons off funds needed to invest in professional soldiers and modern arms and equipment.

The lack of adequate funding generally impedes the modernization of European forces, which are largely obsolescent in their weapons and equipment. European publics and politicians have been loath to fund their militaries at the expense of social welfare programs. The European Union (EU) has 375 million people, compared with the American population of 280 million, but the fifteen EU members collectively spend on their armed forces a figure amounting to about 57 percent of the U.S. defense budget.² Moreover, the few military acquisition programs that the Europeans have been able to undertake are proving inordinately expensive in comparison to equivalent American systems. The Europeans, driven by the political incentives to sustain employment in arms industries and by a desire to avoid dependence on the United States for major weapons systems, are sinking substantial amounts of money into domestic arms procurement. Such programs as the Eurofighter and a new military transport aircraft have been plagued by cost overruns and delivery delays.

If one could set aside issues of employment and prestige, one could argue that the European militaries would be far better off buying American weapons systems. Large purchases of American armored vehicles and transport and combat aircraft would lower per-unit costs for buyers on both sides of the Atlantic. The American weapons systems are also more capable and easier to sustain than their untested European counterparts. In such a case, though the Europeans would in fact be more dependent on the United States for major weapons systems than they would wish, their political voices would carry more weight in Nato councils, because they would have military means.

As it is, the European militaries, broadly speaking, are about thirty years behind those of the United States; their capabilities are roughly equivalent to those of the American military in the Vietnam War. The Europeans lack, for instance, strategic bombers, military transport aircraft, air-to-air refueling, precision munitions, rapid deployment capabilities, cruise missiles, and spaceborne surveillance, reconnaissance, and communications assets. These shortcomings in comparison with U.S. forces, moreover, probably will grow larger as Washington exploits transformational technologies to modernize its own forces. The Europeans are poorly situated to exploit the rapid information-technology advances, which are critical to command, control, computers, intelligence, and logistics.³

The Europeans for the foreseeable future will be unable to maximize destruction of enemy forces while minimizing “collateral damage” to innocent civilians. Without accurate, time-sensitive intelligence coupled with precision munitions, European militaries will not be able to wage war within the moral parameters expected by European public opinion. As Nato secretary general Lord Robertson has said, the Europeans need precision munitions, “which are the only things you can now use to satisfy international law and international public opinion.”⁴

The Europeans have belatedly recognized their profound military shortcomings, but their reform efforts are moving at a glacial pace. As Robert Hunter observes, the most important innovation at the EU summit at Helsinki in December 1999 was the setting up of a “Headline Goal” to become able by 2003 to deploy and sustain forces capable of performing humanitarian, peacekeeping, and peacemaking operations. The summit envisioned a force of up to fifteen brigades with fifty to sixty thousand troops, plus support and rotation elements of two hundred thousand more, ready for deployment in sixty days and sustainable for a year.⁵ A former chairman of Nato’s Military Committee and one of the most insightful military thinkers in Europe, General Klaus Naumann of Germany, however, estimated in 2001 that the EU needs a decade to build up substantial power-projection capabilities.⁶

The gap in military capabilities is growing so large that some Americans question the value of combined operations with Nato partners, particularly for missions involving substantial force projection, such as the campaign in Afghanistan. David Gompert, Richard Kugler, and Martin Libicki perceive a vicious circle: “Because it cannot bank on the Europeans to join in projecting power to defend common interests, the United States makes it unnecessary for them to do so. Because they are not needed, the Europeans, already skittish about such a controversial strategic mission for their forces, fail to invest in the capabilities and technologies that might begin to satisfy the Americans that it is prudent to include allies in their plans to project power.”⁷

FAILING COMBAT TESTS

The military contingencies facing Nato in the post–Cold War period have proliferated and made painfully clear the deleterious effects of the downward spiral in European military spending and modernization. To be sure, Nato states have played important supporting roles in post–Cold War conflicts, granting overflight rights and logistic and base support, and rendering invaluable economic, financial, and political assistance. The United States, though, has performed the “heavy lifting,” providing the bulk of combat power, in all of these cases. Such combat power as Nato states have contributed has done little to destroy the armed forces of adversaries; it has amounted to little more than symbolism, representing political support of American projection of its own combat power.

The war in Kosovo in 1999 marked the largest military endeavor in the alliance’s history. The Kosovo campaign was publicly hailed as a great Nato achievement that forced Serb forces out of the province, stopped the terrorizing of the Kosovo population, and allowed refugees to return home. In the corridors of power, however, the Kosovo war was perceived as a blow to European prestige. It required a more intense application of military power than had Nato operations in Bosnia earlier in the decade, when American airpower was used only periodically to pressure the Serbs. The scale of those operations was dwarfed by the Kosovo air campaign. Europeans were humiliated by the demonstration of the fact that without the United States they lacked the military means even to take on a minor power like Serbia, in their own neighborhood. In that campaign Nato aircraft released 23,614 munitions, 30 percent of which were precision-guided munitions—a sharp increase from the 10 percent dropped in the Gulf War. The number of precision-guided munitions expended by European allies, however, was only 7 percent of the overall total in the war against Serbia, reflecting a shortfall in European inventories.⁸ In addition, European Nato members, lacking support aircraft, largely left such work as air-to-air refueling and airborne electronic warfare, surveillance, and reconnaissance to U.S. aircraft, which flew about 70 percent of the twenty-seven thousand support sorties flown during the war.⁹

After the battle, the Europeans were hard pressed to marshal resources for peacekeeping in Kosovo. Secretary General Lord Robertson acknowledged that Nato’s European members struggled to deploy forty thousand peacekeeping troops to Kosovo—only 2 percent of the combined total of about two million soldiers they had in uniform. The struggle reflected the reality that despite post–Cold War rhetoric, European militaries today look much as they did during the Cold War, when they were organized for territorial defense.¹⁰ It is important to note that European militaries had suffered peacekeeping failures in Bosnia and had turned to the United States for help on the ground to shore up

the tenuous peace. The humanitarian and peacekeeping operations in Kosovo were significantly less demanding than what would have been required had Slobodan Milosevic not ordered his forces to withdraw. On the eve of Milosevic's capitulation, Prime Minister Blair alone pressed President William Clinton to contemplate a massive ground intervention to expel Serb forces from Kosovo. Milosevic thus saved continental European military prestige from another body blow, for it would have been American and British ground forces doing the expelling.

In fact, even at what was presumably the zenith of Nato combat power, shortly after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, European partners were poorly prepared to wage high-intensity warfare. Although Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM involved a "coalition of the willing" and were not formal Nato undertakings, twelve Nato members contributed forces: Turkey provided critical air-basing rights; Canada, Spain, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Greece supported air operations; others sent naval forces to participate in the maritime interdiction effort. Only the British and French, however, contributed substantial combat forces. The British on the eve of the ground war had in the Gulf region thirty-five thousand troops, 170 tanks, and seventy aircraft, while

Nato's dwindling military capabilities are soon to be dissipated by numerous new arrivals to alliance ranks.

the French had sent 13,500 troops, forty tanks, and fifty-six combat aircraft.¹¹ Nonetheless, the United States provided the lion's share of the strategic lift and logistics as

well as 75 percent of the combat aircraft, 85 percent of the combat sorties, and 90 percent of the ground forces that retook Kuwait.¹²

The European combat contribution to the Gulf War was helpful in, but by no means critical to, the campaign to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait. British ground forces advanced quickly and overran about three Iraqi divisions.¹³ Although the French defense minister objected to the Bush administration's orchestration of the war, more strategically nimble minds in Paris prevailed, and the French contingent, an airborne division, seized an Iraqi air base (well away from the center of the American-led effort).¹⁴ At the time of the Gulf War, the Germans were constrained from participation by their constitution, which was subsequently redefined to allow the dispatch of German combat troops to Bosnia.

In the aftermath of 11 September, great fanfare accompanied Nato's activation of Article 5 of its charter in support of the United States. However, the volume of military assets that Nato members have since offered in fulfillment of the "self defense article" has been underwhelming. To be fair, as Philip Gordon points out, Nato partners had made offers of assistance that the Pentagon declined.¹⁵ The Pentagon undoubtedly worried that integrating European assets

into the Afghan campaign would have diverted too much attention from the war effort. Also, the political constraints that each European government would have attached to the use of its respective contingent would complicate command and control, all for little or no payoff on the battlefield.

Nato contributions to the campaign in Afghanistan, then, much like those to the Gulf War, have been at the margins, with the notable exception of the British, whose able forces—the Special Air Service, Special Boat Service, and Royal Marines—were in the heat of battle. Soldiers from the United Kingdom, France, and Canada frequently participated in Afghan operations, while Danish, Norwegian, and German forces did so to a lesser extent. Allies flew at least three thousand sorties on relief, reconnaissance, and other missions, and Nato AWACS* aircraft assisted U.S. airspace patrols. French aircraft flew bombing missions in Operation ANACONDA, the British fired several cruise missiles, and the Netherlands and Italy deployed ships to the Arabian Sea.¹⁶ The allies may yet play a larger role in Afghanistan as the campaign shifts from warfare to peacekeeping and “nation building”—much as they have done in the Balkans—as evidenced by Turkish command of the peacekeeping mission in Kabul.

CONTEMPLATING A GULF REMATCH

Sentiment in Nato capitals is decidedly against American overtures to join in a military campaign against Iraq. The Bush administration may yet, by adroit diplomatic maneuvers, reduce this opposition—save that of Paris, which has traditionally curried favor with Baghdad. As Bush the elder managed to bring the Europeans along before the Gulf War, Bush the younger may be able to convince them to accept the strategic rationale for taking on Iraq anew.

To do so, the United States needs to lay out the case that a convergence of American and European interests exists in the use of force to rid Iraq of Saddam and his weapons of mass destruction.¹⁷ The Europeans and Americans both wish to ensure that no one power dominates the Gulf and its oil. Iraq’s military was weakened substantially by the Gulf War, and international sanctions have prevented new infusions of military equipment—primarily from Russia, France, and China—but Iraq’s forces remain formidable vis-à-vis the conventional forces of the Gulf states. If Saddam were clandestinely to acquire nuclear weapons, his conventional forces could storm Kuwait and the eastern province of Saudi Arabia while he held U.S. forces at bay with the threat of nuclear attack. Under such a nuclear umbrella, Saddam could capture the lion’s share of Gulf oil-producing areas and thus dominate the global market—the proceeds from which would fund a Gulf empire centered on Baghdad.

* AWACS—Airborne Warning and Control System, based on the E-3 Sentry aircraft.

The United States needs to persuade European partners that such a scenario is not fanciful but decidedly within the realm of plausibility for a megalomaniac like Saddam Hussein. After its experiences with the likes of Hitler and more recently Milosevic, Europe should need no reminder of the dangers posed by megalomaniacs. Milosevic, fortunately, lacked the means to exercise power on the international stage; that is not the case with Saddam, who, if left to his own devices, could wield power that poses grave risks to the West and the Gulf region.

However, even if Washington were to elicit acquiescence in a war against Iraq from most Nato capitals, their militaries are not capable of any better combat performance than they have turned in over the past twelve years. In a renewed war against Iraq, the United States would again carry the burden of high-intensity conflict, while the European partners again play auxiliary roles. After an American military occupation of Iraq, the Europeans could assume larger roles in policing and peacekeeping, perhaps under multinational or United Nations auspices. The manpower demands of administering post-Saddam Iraq, however, would outstrip the resources of most Nato allies, whose militaries are already fully occupied in peacekeeping missions in the Balkans. A notable exception would probably be Turkey, which has consistently made manpower contributions to multinational operations, whether in the Balkans or in Afghanistan, though they have escaped the international limelight.

LOOKING FOR MILITARILY CAPABLE ALLIES

The events of 11 September brought on a war of necessity to destroy the terrorist network that, with its political backers, had caused the slaughter of thousands of innocent civilians on American soil. To fight this war, the United States has been able to tap the military capabilities largely nurtured during the Cold War. More recently, it has begun to see the necessity of recapitalizing and “transforming” its armed forces, of exploiting the “revolution in military affairs,” to prepare for further such unforeseen threats. The European Nato partners, in contrast, do not have the military wherewithal to deal with post-Cold War contingencies. If, as it appears in retrospect, European Nato members were “coasting” in their military commitments in the last stages of the Cold War, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the prospect of the so-called peace dividend, they got off their bicycles entirely.

Balkan operations have drained the limited military resources that remain to the Europeans, forcing them to increasingly rely on American power, even at the expense of their political prestige. The Europeans fret that the Americans, to meet the needs of their war on terrorism, will be compelled to pull up their military stakes in the Balkans. While some hold that such a U.S. move would jeopardize transatlantic ties, others argue, and with greater merit, that it would be

healthy for an increasingly bureaucratized and militarily ineffective alliance. Nato has 18,400 troops in Bosnia, of which 3,100 are American, and thirty-nine thousand troops in Kosovo and Macedonia, including 5,700 Americans.¹⁸ European Union assumption of the role of Balkan peacekeeper would show European parliaments and publics the benefits and necessity of budgetary support to their beleaguered militaries. The need to conduct Balkan operations effectively without American assistance would prompt European politicians to make the tough political decisions needed.

Nato is standing at the abyss of military irrelevance. There can be no gainsaying the importance of political, intelligence, diplomatic, and police assistance that Nato partners have lent to the United States in the war against al-Qa'ida. These are indeed critical instruments of national power that need to be brought to bear, primarily on a bilateral basis, not through the alliance's bureaucracy. But the Nato allies were woefully unable to contribute in the military sphere to the campaign in Afghanistan and would be largely militarily irrelevant to a renewed fight against Iraq. Nato's political efficacy in the past was in no small measure attributable to its military power. In the Balkans, none of the plethora of the multinational security organizations with purviews in Europe—the former West European Union, the Organization of Security Cooperation in Europe, or even the United Nations—could have changed the political-military situation on the ground in the Balkans to the extent Nato could, by virtue of its military capabilities. Today, however, Nato's comparative advantage, absent American military power, is seriously eroding, making the alliance barely distinguishable from the political forums that dot the European landscape.

This inability of Nato's European members to make ends and means match should compel statesmen to take a hard look at the strategic rationale for further alliance enlargement. Nato's ability to prosecute a war under the governance of nineteen political leaderships was tested and found wanting in the Kosovo campaign. More Nato members will only make the command and control more cumbersome, to the detriment of the alliance's ability to achieve political goals through military means. Nato's new and potential members, moreover, bring a host of potential new security requirements for the alliance but little by way of resources.¹⁹ Extending membership to the Baltic States in particular strains the efficiency of the alliance; Nato would be hard pressed to mount an Article 5 (collective self-defense) mission should the Baltic States become embroiled with Russia. Making the Baltic States Nato members might work to bring about a large war rather than to deter or defuse a crisis.

As it stands today, the United States, with respect to its transatlantic alliance, is losing security partners and gaining security dependents. Washington has

more to fear from the steady erosion of military capabilities of Nato partners than from the potential distancing that might attend an institutionalized “European security and defense policy” (ESDP). The United States should back ESDP efforts to the extent that they promise a political, military, and economic environment in which European states might reverse the downward spiral of their defense spending and commitments. ESDP could prove to be of potential “blowback” value to Nato capabilities. It might be the means by which Europeans shoulder primary responsibility for security in and around Europe, which could free up American forces for security demands in the Middle East and Asia, to which the Europeans cannot project their power. Over the longer run, European forces could work alongside American expeditionary forces in major contingencies outside Europe.

In the final analysis, the United States needs reliable and capable military partners in Europe. The United States and Europe share history, culture, values, and traditions, and they pursue an array of mutual interests. These interests are likely to come under assault from a variety of adversaries, and from unanticipated directions; no one foresaw, for example, several months before the Kosovo war that the alliance was on the verge of its first major conflict. The new challenges to American and European interests may stem from in or around Europe, or farther afield in the Middle East or Asia. Unless the Europeans reverse course, the United States will find itself with nowhere to turn for military help in Europe and will suffer, ironically, criticism for “unilateralism,” “hegemony,” or “hyperpower” from once-stalwart allies now smarting from wounded pride. If left on its current trajectory, Nato will become yet another European “talk shop,” plush with lofty rhetoric but devoid of the military accessories needed to protect Western interests in a violent world.

NOTES

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